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Successful Time Management

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Successful Time Management
1st edition
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ISBN 978-87-7681-662-9

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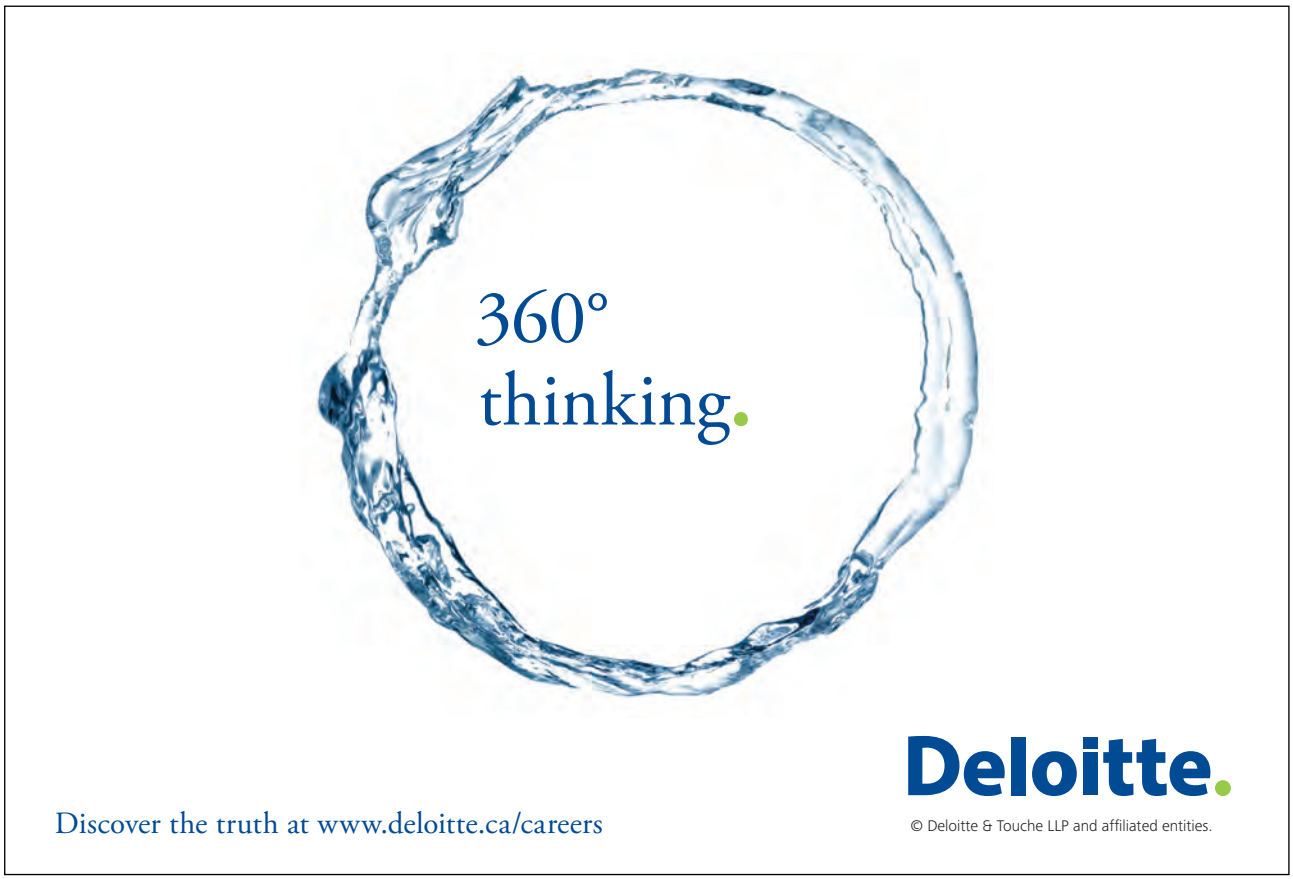

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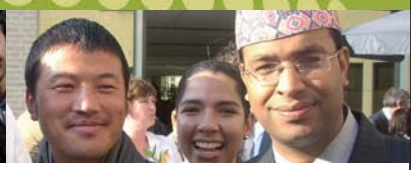

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Preface

Do you make the most of your time or are you always chasing your tail?

Do you use to-do lists? Planners? And do you know what tasks and activities to focus on at any given time?

Today, we have more and more demands made upon us at home and at work than any time in history – tighter deadlines, more work, juggling priorities – you name it!

In this textbook you'll will learn skills and techniques to prioritise your work, how to avoid time wasting events and how to communicate what you want and what you don't want!

Sean McPheat, the Founder and Managing Director of management development specialists, MTD Training is the author of this publication. Sean has been featured on CNN, BBC, ITV, on numerous radio stations and has contributed to many newspapers. He's been featured in over 250 different publications as a thought leader within the management development and training industry.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Importance of Time Management

In the business world of today, time is increasingly at a premium. We spend time commuting to work, then filling up the workday before commuting home again and facing whatever time issues are posed when trying to fulfill our duties outside of the office. There is a principle known as the Pareto Principle, also called the 80:20 Rule. It says that of all the results that we produce in the day, 80 percent of those results are generated with 20 percent of our efforts. The remaining 80 percent of our efforts only generate 20 percent of our results.

This poses an interesting question when it comes to time management; how can we take the 80 percent of our efforts that are currently only producing 20 percent of our results and become more effective with that time? What would we be able to do if we were as effective with that time as we are with the 20 percent of our time that produced 80 percent of our results? Chances are we will never get to 100 percent productivity – we are only human, after all. There will always be distractions and time wasters that tempt us away from being our most productive. However, if you use the tools available in this ebook, you will be able to have more control over your time and produce more results with the time that you do have at your disposal.

1.2 Brief Exercise

Here's a brief exercise to try which can give you an idea of whether or not time management might be an issue for you. First, on a sheet of paper, draw a line down the middle. On the left-hand side, list at least five things that are the most important to you. Start with the most important, and continue the list in order. List people, things, ideals, activities – whatever it is that is very important to you and to your personal happiness. For example, a list might look like this:

- Family
- Health
- Integrity
- Friends
- Work
- Church
- Pets
- Reading

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Now on the right-hand side, list all the things that you spend your time on, starting with what you spend most of your time on and continuing on down to what you spend the least time on. This list might look like this:

- Work
- Family
- Sleeping
- Errands
- Housework
- Helping kids with homework
- Friends
- Church

You've probably figured out the point of the exercise by now. Most of us don't have the luxury of spending the majority of our time on the things that are most important to us. For every item that we are not spending what we would consider to be enough time on, we will experience some form of dissatisfaction over that fact. When things are very important to us and we are not able to dedicate any time to those things at all, unhappiness is often the result.

> Successful time management will help you to become more effective in completing the tasks that you have to complete so there is more time available for you to spend on the things that are important to you.

However, successful time management will help you to become more effective in completing the tasks that you have to complete so that there is more time available for you to spend on the things that are important to you. This isn't necessarily always an easy feat; in some cases, it would take significant changes for you to spend time on the things that are important to you.

For example, if you currently don't have a college degree but you feel that getting one would significantly enhance your career possibilities, deciding to go back to school is a significant, life-altering decision that demands that you restructure your time accordingly. But at the same time, many things that we want to do can be accommodated if we simply learn to use our time more wisely by applying some effective time management techniques. Doing so will make us happier and more balanced so that we are less susceptible to stress and more able to achieve our goals.

> Time management helps you have a greater sense of control over your life – both at work and at home.

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Time management also helps you have a greater sense of control over your life – both at work and at home. When you feel as if you are in control of your time, you feel empowered and confident. Then when something arises that you were not prepared for, you're more likely to be able to deal with it productively rather than getting stopped by it.

1.3 A Time Management Goal

There is a difference between being effective at managing your time and simply being busy. Many of us are used to busy work and may not even question anymore whether or not it is a valid use of our time. But this book will help you take on a new time management goal:

Concentrate on results, not on staying busy.

If you adopt this goal, you will find that it helps to identify which of your activities are actually contributing to your effectiveness and which activities are wasting time, distracting you from goals, and increasing your stress level by making you feel overworked.

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2 How Is Your Time Management?

2.1 Self-Test

Let's start our discussion of time management with an assessment of where you are now. Answer each of the questions below by rating yourself on each at item listed with a 1–5, with one being the lowest or least frequent and five being the highest or most frequent.

Section I

____ 1. Using goal-setting to determine what activities to work on.

____ 2. Facing deadlines and commitments without stress.

____ 3. Checking in with the boss to confirm priorities.

____ 4. Considering how valuable the results will be before taking on a project or task.

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Section II

_____ 1. Working on tasks that have the highest priority.

_____ 2. Being aware of how much time I spend on each of my job tasks.

_____ 3. Being aware of the value of each task I complete.

_____ 4. Prioritizing each new assignment or task according to an analysis of its importance.

_____ 5. Prioritizing a daily 'to do' list.

Section III

_____ 1. Preventing and managing interruptions on a daily basis.

_____ 2. Staying focused on important tasks.

_____ 3. Completing everything during the work day rather than taking work home.

Section IV

_____ 1. Completing tasks well before they are due.

_____ 2. Meeting deadlines without having to ask for extensions.

_____ 3. Sticking to a daily work schedule to complete assigned tasks.

Section V

_____ 1. Setting aside time for scheduling and planning.

_____ 2. Planning time in my day for the unexpected.

_____ 3. Planning daily breaks during the work day.

You'll want to score the quiz section by section. For each section, total up your score and then divide it by the number of questions in that section to give yourself and average score for that section. Now order the sections from lowest to highest. For example, your results might look like this:

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Section II – 2.4

Section IV – 2.8

Section I – 3.2

Section V – 3.5

Section III – 3.7

Each of the sections you scored is related to a specific time-management skill, as shown below.

Section I – Goal Setting

Section II – Prioritization

Section III – Managing Interruptions

Section IV – Procrastination

Section V – Scheduling

From the sample results above, I would know that my weakest area of time management is Section II, or prioritization. It would behoove me to start working on that skill first before moving on to additional skills. I would next work on Section IV, or procrastination, and so on. It would be a mistake to assume that just because my results show that I am strongest in managing interruptions that there is nothing more for me to learn in that area. Each additional chapter of this book will offer tips to help you improve one of these skills, regardless of where your aptitude is at present.

2.2 Daily Activity Log

Another way to gauge where your time management issues might be is to keep track of how you spend your time at work. In order to get an accurate picture, you will need to choose a period of time, preferably a week, that is representative of your average workload. For example, if you have a peak in activity at the end of the month, you would want to pick a week that crosses into that timeframe but is not entirely in that timeframe so that the 'normal' days balance out the heavier workload days. You wouldn't want to pick the week of winter holidays unless you are specifically interested in identifying how you use your time during that period of the year.

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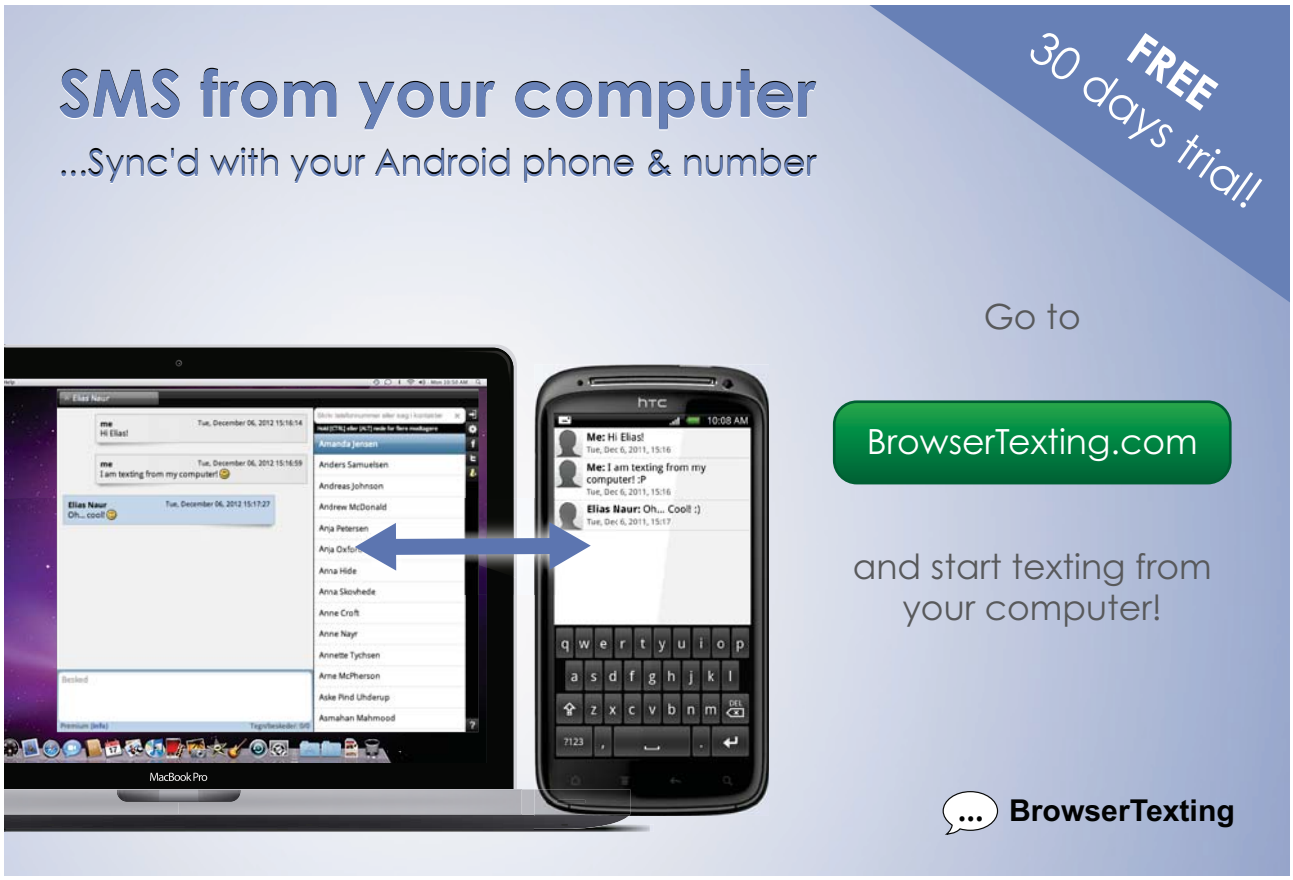
Next, assign a number to each item you list that indicates the priority level of that item in comparison with everything else that you had to do that day. Give a 1 to items that were low priority, a 2 to items that were medium priority, and a 3 to items that were highest in priority.

A sample daily activity log might look like the example in Figure 1:

DATE:	August 12, 2010			
Time Started	Time Ended	Total Time	Activity	Priority 1= Low 2= Medium 3= High
8:00	8:05	5 minutes	Listened to voicemail	2
8:05	9:15	70 minutes	Responded to emails	2
9:15	10:30	45 minutes	Prepared slides for presentation	3
10:30	10:45	15 minutes	Chatted with Sue	1

Figure 1: Sample Daily Activity Log



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There are a few guidelines to follow in order to get the most value out of this activity. These include:

- Use one sheet per day.
- Be accurate. Instead of saying 'worked on project,' put down exactly what you did to work on the project. Did you meet with others? Research benchmark information? Be as specific as you can be.
- Be honest. This is only for you, no one else is going to see it. So be honest about your day and how you spend your time. That's the only way you will be able to identify areas that you can improve.
- Watch your prioritization of your tasks. Not everything can be a 3 and hopefully not everything is a 1, though you could find one day having all of the same level of priority in activities.

At the end of the day, review the information you wrote down and use it to identify the results you achieved that day. From our example in Figure 1, checking your voicemail might have resulted in confirming an appointment. Checking and responding to email might have resulted in resolving a problem. Chatting with Sue probably didn't have any results unless it was work related. If you don't see any results that came from an activity, mark that activity with an asterisk (*). At the end of the week, those starred activities will represent possible areas for improving your use of time.

Now notice how you spent your time in relationship to your priorities. Ideally you spent the most amount of time on the items with the highest priority and the least amount of time on items with the lowest priority. If you see that this is not the case and it's a pattern over time, you have identified one possible area for improvement already.

Depending on how comfortable you feel about it, consider sharing the results of your activity log with your supervisor. It can be a great way to start a conversation about the priorities that he or she wants you to focus on versus where your time is actually going.

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3 Goal Setting

3.1 Introduction

Goal setting is a powerful tool that can be used to motivate and challenge employees or yourself. Knowing that you have achieved a goal gives you a sense of accomplishment and gives you a way to keep track of what you have completed in the work place. Goal setting can be used in every type of workplace and with every level of employee, making it a flexible and very useful tool to learn.

Goal setting can be used in every type of work place and with every level of employee.

However, there is a right way and a wrong way to set goals. Well set goals are clear and you can objectively determine whether or not the goal has been reached. Poorly set goals are not clear and you can't necessarily tell what it will look like once the goal has been achieved. The result is frustration and lack of effectiveness. We'll look at several guidelines for setting goals in this chapter which you can take back to the workplace and start using right away.

3.2 Locke and Latham's Goal Setting Theory

Dr. Edwin Locke published his theory on goal setting in 1968 in an article called "Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives." His theory was that employees were motivated by having a goal to work towards and that reaching that goal improved work performance overall. He showed that people work better when their goals are specific and challenging rather than vague and easy. For example, telling someone to 'improve customer service' is not specific. You might know what it means, but will the employee interpret it the same way? Instead, the goal should be clear, such as 'reduce customer complaints by 50% over a five month period.'

In 1990, Locke and Dr. Gary Latham published "A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance" in which they identified five principles that were important in setting goals that will motivate others. These principles are:

- Clarity
- Challenge
- Commitment
- Feedback
- Task complexity

We'll now look at each of these principles individually.

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3.2.1 Clarity

A clear goal is one that can be measured and leaves no room for misunderstanding. Goals should be very explicit regarding what behavior is desired and will be rewarded. Look at the goals listed in Figure 2 below to help you understand how to be clearer when setting goals. Continue to ask yourself the question, 'What will it look like if the goal is completed?' The answer to the question will help you identify clear goals.

A clear goal is one that can be measured and leaves no room for misunderstanding.

Unclear Goal	Clear Goal
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Figure 2: Examples of Clear Goals

3.2.2 Challenge

What would give you a greater sense of accomplishment: achieving an easy goal or achieving one that was a real challenge? We are motivated by the reward that we believe we will receive for completing tasks. So if we know that a goal is a challenge and is also perceived as such by those that assigned it to us, we are more likely to be motivated to achieve it.

We are motivated by the reward we believe we will receive for completing tasks.

Of course, there is a balance to be struck with this principle. A goal should be challenging, but must still be achievable. If I don't believe that I can meet a goal that you've given to me, I might not even be motivated to make an attempt. I will dread the goal rather than be motivated by it. You should also be sure that you have identified rewards that are appropriate for the achievement of challenging goals versus normal expectations. By positively rewarding the achievement of challenging goals, you encourage not just the achieving employee, but those other employees who witnessed the reward that was given for the achievement.

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3.2.3 Commitment

In order for goals to be effective, they need to be agreed upon. The goal should be in line with the general, established expectations that you have had for the employee in the past. The employee and employer must both be committed to using the resources needed to complete the goal and should also agree on what the reward will be. This takes more time and energy on both parts, but it prevents an end result where the employee didn't have what he or she needed to have in order to be successful, or where the employer is frustrated by the employee's distaste for pursuing the goal.

> The employee and employer must both be committed to using the resources needed to complete the goal.

This doesn't mean that you have to get an employee's absolute agreement to every goal that you set for them before setting it. But it does help to gain general agreement if the employee is involved in setting the goals. Allow them to participate in the conversation about what is needed in order to complete the goal, how much time it will take, and any other ways that you can let them participate in decision making about their performance.

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You could also ask employees to create their own goals for themselves and then discuss them as a team. You might not be aware that someone wants to improve their skills in a certain area or learn more about a specific process. Letting them take on something that they want to learn and feel challenged by will give them more motivation to do the needed work to achieve their other goals as well.

3.2.4 Feedback

Goal setting is not going to be effective if there is not an opportunity for feedback. What if the person is halfway to completing the goal but they have a question? What if you suspect that the person is going about the process of completing the goal in the wrong way? Feedback is a chance to correct or clarify before the goal has been reached.

Ideally, feedback is a type of progress reporting. It gives the supervisor the chance to clarify expectations and to adjust the level of difficulty of the goal if it seems it's too hard or too easy. For the employee, it offers a chance to make sure they are meeting their supervisor's expectations and to get recognition for what they have achieved up to this point. When the goal has been reached, you can also conduct a formal feedback session so that you can discuss what went well and what could use improvement in the future.

3.2.5 Task Complexity

The final principle in Locke and Latham's goal setting theory is related to the level of complexity of the assigned task. When a role is complex or highly technical, the person in that role is often already highly motivated or else they wouldn't have reached that level in their organization. However, even the most motivated person can become discouraged if the complexity of the task and the time it would take to complete it wasn't fully understood. Projects can have the tendency to reveal themselves as being more complex after they have begun, so both the employee and supervisor need to be in communication about how involved a task has become.

> Even the most motivated person can become discouraged if the complexity of the task wasn't fully understood.

In complex or technical work environments, it's important to make sure that the person has enough time to reach the goal. Unreasonable time expectations will drive a person to overwhelm themselves with work and become less effective as the stress level increases. You may also have to take into account the time necessary to allow for a learning curve or to ramp up their existing skills.

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3.3 S.M.A.R.T. Goals

In goal setting, there is one method that has stood the test of time. Although there have been variations to what the acronym stands for over time, the main definition of a SMART goal is one that is:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Realistic
- Timely

3.3.1 Specific

When a goal is specific, then you have clearly identified what it is that you expect to be accomplished. If you can't say specifically what you want to achieve, then how can you expect yourself or a subordinate to be able to achieve it? A specific goal will answer the questions:

- Who? Who is taking action or is affected?
- What? What is the result I want to achieve?
- Where? Is there a specific location?
- When? When do I want to complete this goal?
- Which? Are there restraints or requirements that have to be met?
- Why? Why is this important? What specifically is the benefit of achieving this goal?

For example, let's say that you want to improve customer relations. That's not specific enough. If you answer the questions above, however, it becomes much more specific:

- Who – customers whose accounts I am assigned to (currently 750)
- What – I want to be the person that my customers think of first when they need to talk to someone about internet technology. I will know this is happening when I receive at least 20% more inbound customer calls each month. I will email and then call all 750 customers to re-introduce myself and our services.
- Where – In the five states where I currently have customers.
- When – Within six months.
- Which – Starting with customers that I haven't heard from in more than a year.
- Why – To increase sales, reduce customer complaints, and increase customer satisfaction.

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3.3.2 Measurable

Each goal that you set should be measurable so that you have a means of ascertaining how far along you are in reaching the goal as well as when the goal will be complete. If you have a measure for the entire project, as in our example above of reaching 750 customers, then you can also determine how much of your daily work load should be dedicated to achieving the goal.

So, for our example above, 750 customers need to be emailed and then called in enough time that we see a 20% increase in the amount of inbound calls within six months. Of course, that means that we should complete our outgoing contacts as soon as possible in order to allow time for the customers to respond. Let's assume that we can complete 50 emails in a day in addition to maintaining normal customer service. Then we know that we can email everyone in 15 workdays or three weeks. But, we might not want to wait three weeks between emailing and calling. So let's say we decide to alternate emailing and calling.

In the first week, we decide to only email 100 people. The second week, we call those 100 people. Then we alternate doing the same thing over the following weeks until we have completed our list. Not only do we now have a measurable goal, but we've determined the work that needs to take place in order to achieve that goal and how we need to implement that work into our regular routine so that we have the best chance of success.

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To find the measures for your goal, ask the questions:

- How much?
- How many?
- How often?

Or, just answer the question, "How will I know when I've reached my goal?"

3.3.3 Attainable

As we saw in the last section, having a measure for your goals lets you plan the work that is necessary to achieve the goal. But before you begin working, you need to be certain that the goal is truly attainable. What if in our example above we had said that we wanted to see a 20% increase in inbound calls in just six weeks? How would our plan for reaching the goal have changed? Given our existing resources and the workload that we have to maintain while reaching for the goal, would that even have been possible? If a goal is not attainable given the constraints that you face, you either need to work towards removing those restraints or lowering the level of the goal so that it becomes attainable.

3.3.4 Realistic

If a goal is to be realistic, it must be something that you are willing and able to work towards. This doesn't mean that all your goals have to be low and simple. It just means that you have done a thorough analysis of the task at hand and you have come to the conclusion that the goal is realistic. Some questions you could ask yourself during this analysis include:

- Do I have the resources (financial, personnel, equipment, etc.) to reach the goal?
- Do I have the support of others in the department and the organization?
- What knowledge or expertise am I lacking that I will need to locate or learn?
- Have I reviewed my existing workload with my supervisor to prioritize this goal with existing goals?

In some version of SMART goals, the R actually stands for 'relevant.' In this case, you are comparing the goal to the overall mission of the organization and to your personal goals, objectives, and roles. Is the goal something that you should actually be completing or is it better suited for someone else? Will it improve your overall skills and ability to do your job? If not, why are you pursuing it?

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3.3.4 Timely

The final component of the SMART goals strategy is 'timely.' Without adding a time restriction to your goals, you don't have the necessary motivation to get going as soon as possible. Adding a realistic time boundary lends a sense of urgency to your goal and will help to keep you focused. Since organizations change regularly, so can goals. Making sure your goal is set with a time limit also ensures that you complete the goal while it is still relevant to what you are doing on the job.

3.4 Backward Goal-Setting

Another method of goal setting is to start with the end result in mind and then plan backwards from that point to determine what you need to be doing each step along the way in order to achieve that goal. This is counter-intuitive to most goal-setting approaches. We usually start from where we are and then determine what we need to do first, second, third, etc. in order to get to the goal at some point in the future. But if you start at the end and then plan backwards, you can determine whether or not your plan is realistic in the time frame you are giving yourself. This process also helps you determine what the milestones are and any dependencies that have to be completed before other steps can be worked on.

The process works by following the steps below:

- Determine your specific ultimate goal. You can use the SMART criteria to do so if that helps.
- Starting at the ultimate goal, what is the step that has to be accomplished just before you reach your goal? What has to be achieved and by when so that you can ensure that you will reach that ultimate goal?
- Work backward again. Now you're identifying what your second-to-last milestone has to be and when it has to be completed in order for you to be successful in reaching your ultimate goal.
- Continue working backwards until you have identified the very first milestone that needs to be achieved and by when you need to achieve it.

When you work backwards like this, it is much easier to identify steps that you might have missed when you plan from the present forward because it forces you to look at your planning from the opposite direction. You can also get an idea of whether or not the time goal you have set is realistic and how much you will need to increase your work activity to make the time frame realistic.

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4 Tools for Prioritization

4.1 Introduction

Prioritization is the ability to make the best, most effective use of your time, ability, and resources as well as those of your team. When you feel like work is never-ending and time is at a premium, prioritization is what will help you spend your time wisely and move forward on the goals that are the most important.

At its simplest level, prioritizing is straightforward. You simply determine the criteria that are most important to you and most related to your goals and then use those criteria to order the tasks that you have in front of you in terms of priority. For example, you might choose to work first on the project that:

- Is most likely to be profitable
- Has to be finished before others can move on with their work
- Is most important to your supervisor
- Has a budget allocated to it already
- Has the necessary tools readily available

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Yet not all situations that require prioritization are this simple. In many cases, we are making the decision regarding what to work on first when many things seem important. In the rest of this chapter, we'll review several tools you can use to help you prioritize your work load. Let's start with a tool for considering what is truly important versus what is simply urgent.

4.2 Important vs. Urgent

We've all had it happen. We're having a good day, getting our work done, when someone calls or rushes into the office in a hurry. They have a fire on their hands and they want your help in putting it out. You feel the need to drop what you're doing and dedicate your time to helping them with the latest crisis. You have to be a team player, right? And if the person asking for help is your boss, do you really have a choice?

Well, maybe you do have a choice. You need to learn to determine whether or not the sudden urgent request from someone else is truly important in relationship to your goals, your priorities, and your role in the organization. To help you do this, consider the chart in Figure 3. You'll see that the chart is divided into four quadrants based on whether or not an item is important and whether or not it is urgent.

	Important	Not Important
Urgent	**QUADRANT I**	**QUADRANT II**
Not Urgent	**QUADRANT III**	**QUADRANT IV**

Figure 3: Important vs. Urgent

Looking at the figure above, in which quadrant would we ideally spend the majority of our workdays? In order to have the greatest job satisfaction and the least amount of work related stress, we would spend the majority of our time in Quadrant III. In this quadrant, we are not harried by urgent, pressing matters, but we are working on things that are important to the organization. We are able to make progress and move forward, feeling at the end of the day that we have accomplished a great deal.

> In order to have the greatest job satisfaction and the least amount of work related stress, we would ideally spend the majority of our time in Quadrant III.

That's the ideal world. But where do we spend the most of our time in the real world? If you are constantly responding to the crises of others – even when they don't actually have an impact on your own work or work product, then you are in Quadrant II. Everything feels urgent, but it's not actually important. If you spend your day doing busy work, then you are focused in Quadrant IV, where things are not urgent and are not important. This can be a frustrating experience because you may not be able to feel as if you have contributed something of value at the end of the day. These could be distractions as well, such as talking to colleagues, surfing the internet, or other time wasters.

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Quadrant I situations could are important because whatever is at stake is actually very important to our own job or work product and it happens to be urgent as well.

All of us are going to spend time in Quadrant I eventually. Whatever is at stake is actually very important to our own job or work product, and it happens to be urgent as well. What you want to learn to do is to distinguish these true emergency situations from situations that seem urgent but just aren't that important. Before you drop everything next time, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this truly important or just urgent to the person requesting my help?
- What will the consequences be if I don't handle this immediately?
- Do I actually have important and urgent things that should be done instead?
- Is there someone else who can handle this situation?

If you determine that the request for your action is actually not both urgent and important, then chances are there is someone better suited to handle the request. If you are receiving the request from your supervisor, you can ask her what she would rather that you focus on – the item that is both urgent and important, or the item that she has brought to you. Reminding her that you have other important work to do and that it will have to wait if you respond to her urgent request might have her reassign the request – or it might not. But at least you know that you are applying your efforts to exactly the activity that she wants you to handle at that time.

Reminding a supervisor that you have other important work to do – even if it's not urgent – might have her reassign the assignment to someone else.

4.3 Paired Comparison Analysis

When you aren't certain how to make a decision because you can't seem to identify good criteria, a paired comparison analysis can be useful. It allows you to compare each item on your list with every other item on the list in order to determine which are the most important. It is also very useful when you are trying to compare things that are completely different from one another.

Paired Comparison Analysis is useful when you don't have identified decision-making criteria or when you are trying to compare things that are completely different from one another.

Let's imagine that you can't decide which of the following to focus on first:

- Customer service
- Employee training
- Increasing sales
- Decreasing lost revenue

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You start by creating the paired comparison chart. Assign a letter (in this case, A-D) to each of the four items you are trying to prioritize. Then create a grid with each item as a row heading and a column heading. See Figure 4 for an example.

	Customer Service (A)	Employee Training (B)	Increasing Sales (C)	Decreasing Lost Revenue (D)
Customer Service (A)				
Employee Training (B)				
Increasing Sales (C)				
Decreasing Lost Revenue (D)				

Figure 4: Creating the Paired Comparison Grid

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You need to ignore the blocks that have you comparing the item to itself, since there will not be anything to prioritize in those cases. You should then ignore the boxes that are repeating a comparison such as Employee Training vs. Increasing Sales and Increasing Sales vs. Employee Training. The resulting grid is shown in Figure 5.

	Customer Service (A)	Employee Training (B)	Increasing Sales (C)	Decreasing Lost Revenue (D)
Customer Service (A)				
Employee Training (B)				
Increasing Sales (C)				
Decreasing Lost Revenue (D)				

Figure 5: Paired Comparison Grid with Boxes to be Ignored

In the boxes that remain, you compare the two items and determine which one is more important. For example, if you start at the top left, the first pair that you are comparing is Customer Service and Employee Training. Between those two items, write the letter of which item is more important. Follow it with a number that relates to how large the difference in importance is, starting with 0 for there being no significant difference in importance to 3 for a large difference in importance. See the example of a completed grid in Figure 6.

	Customer Service (A)	Employee Training (B)	Increasing Sales (C)	Decreasing Lost Revenue (D)
Customer Service (A)		A, 2	C, 1	D,1
Employee Training (B)			C, 2	D, 3
Increasing Sales (C)				C, 2
Decreasing Lost Revenue (D)				

Figure 6: Example of a Completed Paired Comparison Grid

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Now you can determine the results by adding up the importance scores for each item. In our example, the results would be:

- A – 2
- B – 0
- C – 5
- D – 4

From this analysis, we can determine that increasing sales has the highest priority, followed closely by decreasing lost revenue. These would be the two items to give the most priority to according to this tool. It's important to note that although employee training received no rating, that doesn't mean that it is not important at all – it may already be of high quality or it might just not be as large an area of concern as the other three items.

4.4 Grid Analysis

When you have a number of good options to consider and a number of factors that could influence the decision, you may need a prioritization tool that is more complex than the paired comparison grid. In these cases, a grid analysis is a useful tool for making decisions or prioritizing your work.

To begin, you'll create another grid. This time the options will be the rows and the factors that will affect your prioritization will be the column headings. You will then assign a score and a weight to each pairing in order to get an overall score for each option. Let's use an example for this grid analysis of prioritizing which firm to use as a marketing consultant. See Figure 7 for the example grid.

	Cost	Overall Experience	Experience Similar to This Project	Recommendations	Quoted Time Frame
Weights:					
ABC Consulting					
Market Consulting Inc.					
XYZ Consulting					
Global Consulting Resources					

Figure 7: Example of a Grid Analysis

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Now that your grid is ready, you need to assign a weight to each factor so that you know which factors are most important and which are less important. Use zero if the factor isn't important at all and five for the most important factor or factors. You can have more than one factor with the same score. Write the weight in the 'weight' row in your grid.

Next you will start with the first column, in this case cost. Go down the column and rate each option on this factor with a number from zero for poor to five for excellent. Then move on to the next column and complete the same rating, repeating this step until the columns are all completed. The resulting grid will look like the grid in Figure 8.

To calculate the results, you take the rating that you gave the consulting firm for a category and multiply it by the weight factor. For example, ABC Consulting was rated a '3' on cost, which has a weight factor of '5'. Simply multiply 3 by 5 for a score of 15 for this category for ABC Consulting. Once you have all of the scores tabulated, you add the scores across each factor to get a total score for each option. Figure 9 shows you what this would look like in our example.

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	Cost	Overall Experience	Experience Similar to This Project	Recommendations	Quoted Time Frame
Weights:	5	3	5	4	2
ABC Consulting	3	3	1	5	4
Market Consulting Inc.	4	4	3	4	4
XYZ Consulting	5	4	5	3	3
Global Consulting Resources	2	5	5	5	1

Figure 8: Example of a Completed Grid Analysis

	Cost	Overall Experience	Experience Similar to This Project	Recommendations	Quoted Time Frame	TOTAL
Weights:	5	3	5	4	2	
ABC Consulting	15	9	5	20	8	57
Market Consulting Inc.	20	12	15	16	8	71
XYZ Consulting	25	12	25	12	6	80
Global Consulting Resources	10	15	25	20	2	72

Figure 9: Completed Weighted Scores

In this case, the 'winner' is XYZ Consulting. When you present your recommendations for a consulting firm, you can now demonstrate a logical reason for the recommendation and even discuss the different factors individually should someone want to remove a factor from consideration.

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4.5 Pareto Analysis

When you use a Pareto analysis, you are taking information and grouping it into similar categories. You then rate the information in importance and that will tell you which area(s) you need to work on first. For example, let's say you were given the task of improving customer service ratings by 15% over the next quarter. How are you going to begin doing this? The Pareto Principle says that 20% of your efforts result in 80% of the results. So if you want to get the most return on your investment, how do you determine what that 20% should consist of?

Let's start by looking at the results that you've been given. Imagine that you have the following information in Figure 10 from a series of customer service surveys that customers completed last quarter:

Item	Number of Complaints	Complaint
A	9	Phone rings many times before being answered.
B	12	Rarely get a real person on the phone.
C	20	Staff members don't know the information customers need.
D	17	Staff seems unwilling to help.
E	18	No delivery window means customers have to wait at home all day.
F	10	It takes too long to place an order.
G	6	The return policy is too strict.
H	3	You are often out of stock on an item.

Figure 10: Sample Customer Complaints

At first glance, you might say that the third complaint, "Staff members don't know the information customers need" should be your priority since it had the most complaints. But let's see if that would be the most effective.

Examine the complaints to determine which ones are related. You might end up with a list like this:

- Phone Response – 21 complaints (Items A and B)
- Customer Response and Courtesy – 37 (Items C and D)
- Order Fulfillment – 31 (Items E, F, and H)
- Return Policy – 6 (Item G)

Now by examining the results you can see that you would have the best results if you focus on customer response and courtesy, followed by the order fulfillment process. By prioritizing your efforts on these two areas, you'll be responding to 68 out of 95 of the complaints received, or nearly 72% of all complaints.

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4.6 Nominal Group Technique

When you work in a group, you often have to come to some sort of consensus on what your priorities should be. It is not always easy to do so, particularly when the group members have different motives and different goals. The Nominal Group Technique is a means of reaching consensus when you have a diverse group and when having each member 'buy-in' to the decision is important for the success of the team.

> The Nominal Group Technique allows everyone to have a 'say' in what the priorities for the team will be.

While in a group, you create a list of issues that you think you need to prioritize. Use a flipchart or other means of capturing the issues. Make sure that everyone participates. If you think there are those people in the group who would be uncomfortable listing their concerns, you can do this exercise in writing and keep it anonymous, but doing it in a group is good because it helps facilitate discussion and can let you clarify the ideas and issues that are listed.

Once you have identified the list, see if there are items in the list that can be grouped together. For example, if you had on the list 'poor response from technical support' and 'technical support takes too long to reply,' you could group those two together. Make sure that the group agrees with the way you are grouping them; you might have misunderstood what the person was trying to say.

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Once you have a final list, have each person rank what they feel is the most important to the least important issue to be solved. Encourage them to think of each item in terms of the impact it has on their results. Is something just an annoyance or a pet peeve, or does it actually have a definite impact on the way that they are able to work? If there are 10 issues, the ranking should be 1 to 10 with 10 being the most important and 1 being the least important.

What you end up with is a data set that you can use to determine what the group feels is the priority issue to work on. For example, you might end up with data that looks like that in Figure 11. As you go through this exercise, explain to the group what you are doing so that they understand the results and they realize that the exercise is a fair way to determine what to work on first.

	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3	Issue 4	Issue 5	Issue 6
Amy (or Person 1 if you are doing this anonymously)	5	1	3	4	6	2
George	6	4	1	3	2	5
Pete	2	3	5	6	1	4
Celia	4	1	2	5	3	6
Robert	1	2	4	6	3	5
Ann	3	2	6	4	5	1
TOTALS:	21	13	21	28	20	23

Figure 11: Sample Nominal Group Technique Grid

In the example in Figure 11, there is a strong sense from the group that Issue 2 is the least important issue that you are facing. The group has also determined that the most important issue is Issue 4. If you decide to assign priority to work assignments using this method, you would focus on those that would improve Issue 4 before moving on to Issue 6 and so on. In a case where your scores are tied for an issue, you may have to make the decision using another tool or simply ask your supervisor which item they would prefer that you work on.

4.7 Delegation

One further technique you can use to prioritize your time is to identify the tasks that you don't actually need to perform yourself. Many of us are guilty of trying to do everything on our own. It may be because we feel that it would be faster just to do it ourselves than to try to explain how to do it to someone else. Or maybe we are concerned that no one else will do as good a job as we would. However, none of us has endless time and endless energy. If we can delegate tasks to other people, why not do it?

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There are a number of benefits to you, to the person that you delegate your tasks to, and to the organization as a whole when you learn how to properly delegate. The benefits for you include:

- Reduced stress
- Additional time to dedicate to tasks that you truly need to work on yourself
- Practicing the skill of effective delegation

Benefits for the other person include:

- The opportunity to learn something new
- The chance to feel useful and part of the team
- The chance to show you what they can do and earn accolades for that achievement

And finally, benefits for the organization include:

- Having more than one person who knows how to perform the given task
- Adding a new perspective to a situation
- Having employees that are less stressed due to sharing their work duties

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5 Managing Interruptions

5.1 Introduction

If you used the daily activity log exercise recommended in Chapter 2, then you probably have a good idea of how many times in the day you face interruptions. But if you didn't, then you might consider trying the activity now. Most of us are so accustomed to being interrupted during the day that unless we are intentionally aware of it or unless we are in a particularly busy period, we won't even notice when it is happening.

Most of us are so accustomed to being interrupted during the day that unless we are intentionally aware of it, we won't even notice when it's happening.

Some interruptions are inevitable, since not everyone that you work with, from bosses to subordinates, will have the same exact priorities every day that you have. In an ideal world you could simply align your priorities so that you all had the exact same work tasks every day and you would greatly decrease or eliminate interruptions. But in many work situations this is impossible. We all have a role to play in our organization that is different from the role of our colleagues. This means that eventually, there will be interruptions. How you manage them, however, is entirely up to you.

5.2 Take Responsibility for Interruptions You Cause

None of us is entirely free of responsibility for some of the interruptions in our workday. If we can identify those times that we are causing our own interruptions, we can reclaim that time by simply disciplining ourselves and others around us to eliminate the causes of those interruptions. Compare the time that you lose to interruptions to the value you could gain by being productive during that time. Then ask yourself: is it worth it? If the answer is yes and the distraction is serving a purpose that helps you be more effective at work, then by all means, allow for that distraction. But if, as in most cases, the answer is no, then take the steps that you need to take in order to eliminate interruptions that you have a hand in causing.

If we can identify those times that we cause our own interruptions, we can reclaim that time by simply disciplining ourselves and others around us to eliminate the causes of those interruptions.

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How many of these situations sound familiar?

- You use interruptions as excuses.

  For you, an interruption is an excuse for why you haven't been able to complete something. If someone or something interrupts you, pay attention to whether or not you use that interruption as a reason to stop what you were working on. You shouldn't stop your work for an interruption unless you feel that the interruption is more important than what you were working on. If you have to stop what you are doing, be sure to write down or otherwise mark where you were so that you can get right back to where you were once you have handled the interruption.

- You try to work on multiple projects at once.

  While 'multi-tasking' is a buzz word that tends to convey a sense of competence and high-level performance, the truth is that switching from project to project can be a major interruption. If you are in charge of what you work on from day to day, then make it a goal to complete one project, task, or item fully before moving on to the next one. If you are not in control of your own time, be sure to clarify with your supervisor whether or not they want you to stop working on your current project to start working on the new one.

- You procrastinate.

  When you don't want to do something, you find reasons to avoid doing it. You might tell yourself that these things are important, but are they truly more important than what you are doing? There's a saying regarding procrastination that can be helpful when you face this self-created time waster. It says 'you don't have to want to do something in order to do it.' If you've determined that the task you're procrastinating about is actually the most important task that you have at the moment, then why not just knock it out and get it done? The sooner you take action to complete the task, the sooner you will be done with it and ready to move on to the next item on your list. See the next chapter for more tips on managing procrastination.

- You are distracted.

  Each of us has an environment in which we will do our best work. While the office with the window might be a sign of success, your success won't last long if the view out of that window is distracting you. Determine what the distractions are in your environment that you can eliminate. Some other examples of distractions might include responding to the sound of an email arriving, automatically stopping work to answer the phone (when it's not explicitly your job), or looking up every time someone walks by your office door. Arrange your furniture so that you can avoid distractions. If noise is a problem, close your door or wear headphones that block sounds or play music that won't distract you.

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- You accept non-work calls at work.

  Everyone has an emergency from time to time that means you need to take a call at work. But in many cases, we have started accepting calls at work that are not emergencies. It's important to realize that we have trained those people in our lives to believe that they can call us at work whenever they want or need to. But if it's affecting our productivity, these calls become an interruption and a nuisance. You may need to tell your friends and family that you can no longer accept calls at work unless they are an emergency – and then stick to it the next time your best friend calls to tell you about her new boss. You can do this in a way that lets the person know that they and what they have to say are important to you. Just ask if you can call them back on your next break or when you leave work.

- You often have co-workers stopping by to chat.

  Everyone wants to have friends at work. They can make some of the hard days bearable and the good days better. But when the stopping by occasionally becomes habitual, the friendly chats can become true interruptions. Treat these interruptions as you would the phone calls from family and friends – let the person know that you have an important project that you are working on and you'd like to get back to them later on that day. Pick a day to have lunch together or meet up for your coffee break. Just don't let chatting keep you from getting done what you need to accomplish.

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- You answer every email as it is received.

  Email has had a major impact on the way that we work, but not all of the changes have been for the good. Many of us have the tendency to jump every time that we receive an email. We hear the 'ping' of the email arriving and we immediately stop what we are doing in order to see who it was from and what it was about. In most cases, this is a waste of time and simply interrupts what you were doing. Sure, there are times when you need to be alert to arriving email, but ideally you should have set times that you check your email during the day, say first thing in the morning, around 10:30 a.m., after lunch, and an hour before leaving for the day. You may even be able to check less than this – it just depends on your job and the expectations of your workplace.

5.3 More Tips for Managing Interruptions

As you become more aware of the distractions and interruptions in your day, you'll also become more aware of the amount of time that you are wasting on them. This will serve as motivation to continue trying to eliminate interruptions from your day. Here are some additional tips to help you control interruptions and get more productivity out of your work day:

- Before calling a meeting, determine if it is truly necessary. Can you handle it by email or a short conference call? Don't take your time and the time of other people unless a meeting is truly the best way to achieve your goal.
- Before calling a meeting, be sure that you have a specific result in mind. If you don't know why you are meeting, how wil you know if you accomplished what you needed to accomplish?
- Before attending a meeting, be sure that you understand exactly what the meeting is about. 'To discuss the third quarter figures' is not specific enough; what is the expected result? Then when you go to the meeting, you'll be fully prepared to participate and move the group towards the result that is expected.
- Use 'Do Not Disturb.' If you have that feature on your phone system, use it. The feature allows you to direct calls to your voicemail rather than having the phone ring in your office. Then when it is convenient for you, you can respond. Don't be afraid to use a sign on your door that says 'do not disturb' if you have a serious deadline that you have to concentrate on – sometimes a physical sign is what it will take for some people to get the message.
- Stand up to visitors. Not in the sense of defending yourself, but in the sense of defending your time. A great tactic for ending a conversation is to simply stand up from your desk. This signals to the other person that you have somewhere to be. If you have to, actually walk out of the office. Head to the bathroom, the break room, or even the stairwell for a moment before returning to your desk.

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- Learn to just say no. Most of us don't like to say no to others. We want to be seen as a team player and we want to be included in what the rest of the team is talking about or doing. But sometimes the best thing for you and your workload is to simply say no. You can do so graciously, of course, by giving the person another opportunity for whatever they are offering. If they invite you to lunch today, propose that you go on Friday. If they want your input on how they are progressing on their project, let them know that you would like to help them but you can't at the moment – then schedule time in your week to help them when it's convenient for you both.
- Prioritize your email and ask others to do the same by using an appropriate subject heading. Not every email is urgent! Then again, some are. So use the indication of urgent conservatively and ask others to use it sparingly as well. Your email subject should be clear and indicate whether or not a response is needed. Some examples include:
  - Update on Smith Project – Response Needed by 9/1/10
  - FYI – Budget Reallocation Request Approved
  - Invitation to Welcome Reception for James Martin, New SVP of Marketing – RSVP Required

Brain power
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6 Managing Procrastination

6.1 Introduction

We are all guilty of procrastination from time to time. It's only natural to resist what we have to do sometimes, particularly when there are more appealing things to do waiting right there for you. But if you have a chronic problem with procrastination, it is likely impacting your ability to get your work done and get it done on time. In order to manage procrastination, you need to first become aware of when it is happening. If you can't determine when you are procrastinating, you won't be able to come up with the motivation you need to stop procrastinating and move forward. Next, you will need to try to understand why you are procrastinating. Is it something you don't enjoy? Or is there another reason why you are stalling on getting the task done? Once you understand why you are procrastinating, you can take the steps needed to manage and resolve it.

6.2 Defining Procrastination

There are times when you have a valid reason for avoiding doing a project. For example, perhaps you don't have all the information you need or you believe that by waiting an additional time period you will have more accurate results. And then there are the times when waiting is simply that – waiting. When you are focusing on something other than what you should be focusing on according to your priorities and the priorities of your organization, you are procrastinating. Another more scientific definition comes from psychologist Clarry Lay. He states that procrastination is the gap between the time that we intend to perform a task and the time that we actually perform it. That gap of time could actually be applied to the task that you are avoiding, getting it completed and out of your way that much sooner.

When you are focusing on something other than what you should be focusing on according to your priorities and the priorities of your organization, you are procrastinating.

Remember as well what procrastination is not. Not every time that you put something off is procrastination. If you have put off a task because it is unimportant in favor of one that is important, that is not procrastination. That is good time management and prioritization.

6.3 Indicators of Procrastination

Are you still not sure of how often you procrastinate when you good simply tackle the task and get it done? Here are some common indications that you may be procrastinating:

- Filling your 'to do' list with items of low importance
- Filling your 'to do' list just to look busy
- Handling papers repeatedly instead of doing what you need to do with them the first time

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- Reading emails repeatedly without deleting, filing, or responding to them
- Finding reasons to leave your desk when you start working on a high-priority task
- Leaving something on your 'to do' list that is actually important
- Deciding to postpone working on something until you feel like it, have more energy, or are in a better mood
- Saying yes to helping others with tasks that are not as important as those already on your 'to do' list
- Deciding to wait to work on a project because you think you do your best work under pressure

If you performed the Daily Activity Log exercise described in Chapter One, you can now look back at your logs and see if you can identify where you were procrastinating. Look for tasks that you normally have a hard time completing. Then look to see what you did earlier that day. Did you take multiple coffee breaks? Did you make phone calls that weren't really necessary at that time? Once you recognize when you procrastinate, you have the opportunity to change your attitude and your behaviors in order to manage and eliminate procrastinating behavior.

6.4 Why You Procrastinate

Although each of us has a different reason for procrastinating, there are some common situations when people tend to procrastinate. If none of these seem to fit your exact situation, they may help you to brainstorm your own feelings about the tasks that you are avoiding. Some possibilities for why you procrastinate include:

- You simply find the job unpleasant
- You are disorganized
- You find the task overwhelming
- You are a perfectionist
- You are having trouble making a decision

First we'll examine each of these common causes of procrastination. Next, we'll discuss means for combating procrastination in each case.

6.4.1 You Find the Task Unpleasant

The fact is, there are certain aspects of all jobs that are unpleasant. You might be bored, you might be unsure of how to handle the situation, or you might need help and you've been afraid to ask for it. Sit with the feeling of unpleasantness and see if you can determine where the feeling is coming from. Ask yourself some questions such as:

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- What am I afraid will happen?
- What result am I avoiding?
- Do I understand the importance of this task?
- Do I recognize the value of completing the task?

If you repeatedly hear yourself saying, "I just don't want to," you haven't gotten to the root of why you find the task unpleasant. Keep the conversation with yourself going until you can pinpoint why it is that you feel this way about the matter at hand.

6.4.2 You Are Disorganized

No one wants to admit it. But some of us are disorganized. We might be lacking the tools that would help us to prioritize and to avoid procrastination. If you see yourself as disorganized and you've learned to tolerate that, it's a convenient excuse to have the next time that you want to avoid doing something. Organized people tend to avoid procrastination by organizing their work space, their priorities, and their projects so that they remain motivated by the work at hand. Once you see the cost that being disorganized is having on your ability to complete tasks, you may be motivated to improve your organization skills.

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Some signs that you might be disorganized include:

- A general array of clutter on your desk
- No discernible filing system, or one that is ineffective
- A large pile of papers 'to be filed'
- Taking more than 30 seconds or so to locate any necessary documentation
- Losing important contact information or other data
- Forgetting meetings or other scheduled events or tasks
- Missing deadlines or completing them at the last minute

6.4.3 You Find the Task Overwhelming

No matter who you are and what your experience level might be, there are times when all of us will feel overwhelmed by a task. The key to this situation is to identify exactly why you are feeling overwhelmed. Usually it is because something is missing that you may not have even identified yet. For example, the task may feel overwhelming because you:

- Don't have the resources you need
- Don't have the information you need
- Don't have the time that you need
- Don't have the confidence that you can succeed
- Don't have the expertise or experience of doing something similar before
- Aren't convinced that you have the support of the others on your team or in your division

Once you understand why you feel overwhelmed, you will also understand what you need to do to eliminate this feeling.

6.4.4 You Are a Perfectionist

For the perfectionists among you, getting it right the first time is just a way of life. And for many of you, you can point to the level of success that insisting on perfection for yourself has created. But if you are procrastinating and you are a perfectionist, then chances are that you have decided that you don't want to proceed because you don't think you can do it perfectly. This is another sign that you may be lacking the kind of resources you need to do the job well.

However, you can't get stopped by trying to be a perfectionist. Without taking any risks at all, you can't learn anything new, grow your skills, or achieve more than you thought was possible. Waiting until you think everything will be perfect to begin is like saying you won't leave your house for your commute to work until you know every light will be green. There are simply no guarantees that anything we do will be perfect. But that doesn't mean we can't strive to do our best.

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6.4.5 You Are Having Trouble Making a Decision

Another common reason for procrastinating is that you are having trouble making a decision. It could be that you don't feel you have the authority to make it, that you don't have the information you need to make it, or that you simply can't decide what the best course of action should be. If you can't make a decision, you will continue to face a road block until you make it. You will need to identify what it will take for you to make the decision to your best ability.

6.5 Strategies for Overcoming Procrastination

6.5.1 Introduction

Unfortunately, procrastination can become an ingrained habit that is difficult to stop. So you will need to work to conscientiously combat the behaviors that have led to your procrastination in the past. There is no one right way to combat procrastination – anything that helps you to be more productive is useful. Consider trying a combination of the techniques in this section until you find the ones that work best for you.

> Procrastination can become an ingrained habit that is difficult to stop. You will need to work to conscientiously combat the behaviors that have led to procrastinating in the past.

6.5.2 When the Task is Unpleasant

This category of activities is probably the most often experienced – and certainly one that most workers can relate to. What's important is finding a way to motivate yourself and to be accountable for your actions so that you are less likely to procrastinate and so that you focus on the value that your efforts will bring. Here are some tips that you can use when you simply don't want to do what you have to do:

- Identify what will happen if you don't complete the task. How will it impact you? Your coworkers? What about your customers, both internal and external?
- Remind yourself that you are being paid to do the tasks that your supervisor or the organization feels are most important. If you aren't doing that, you aren't doing what you are being paid to do.
- Determine ways to reward yourself for completing unpleasant tasks. Preferably, they should not be unhealthy rewards!
- Ask your coworker to check up on you to make sure you have done what you said you would do. This is a positive use of peer pressure.
- Remind yourself that you don't have to WANT to do something in order to DO it.

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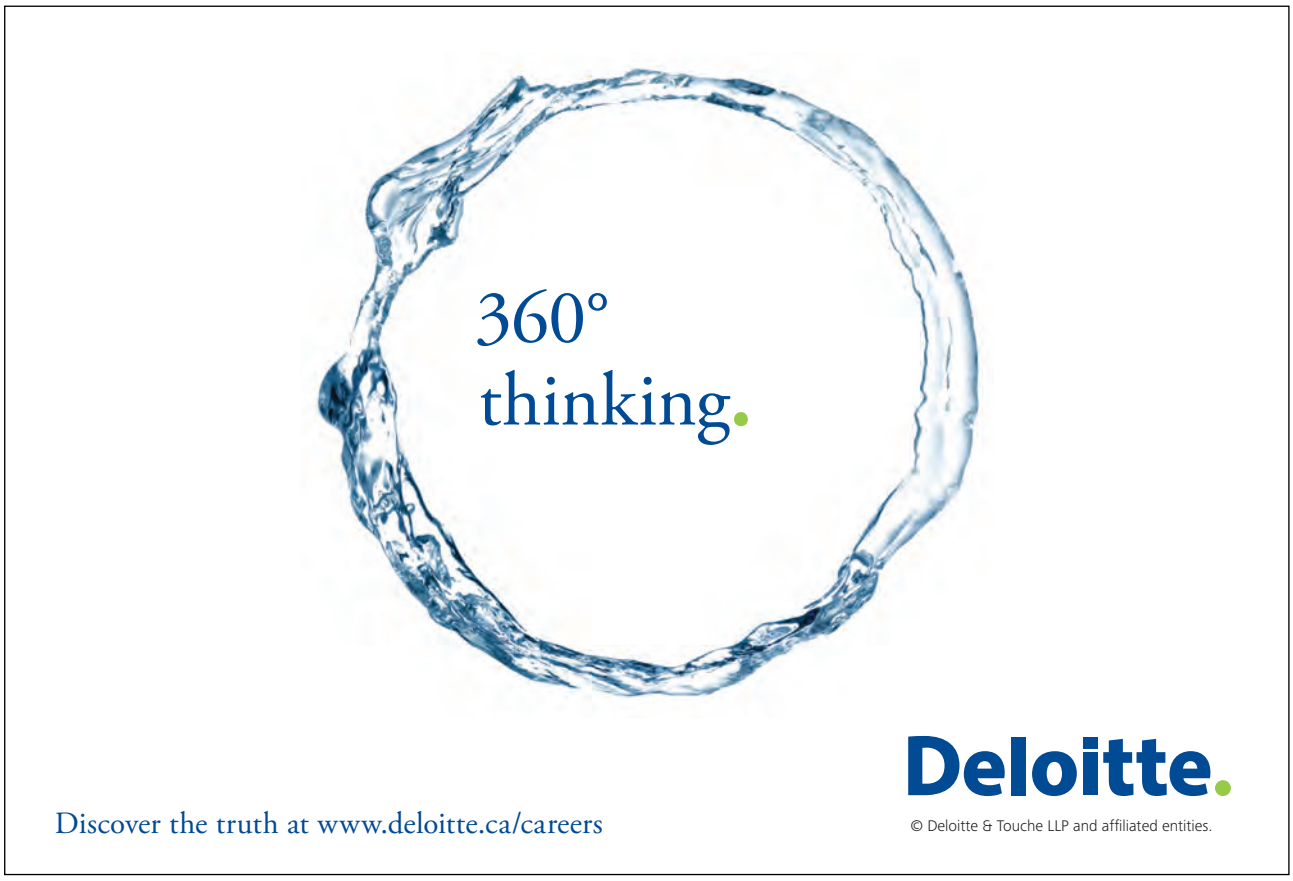
6.5.3 When You Are Disorganized

When you are disorganized, you need to learn the tools that will help you to make organization a normal part of your day. Remember that it can take weeks to change a habit, so you need to give yourself the time to make your new practices your new habits. Here are some suggestions for how to get organized once and for all:

- Make it a rule that you will not leave for the day without clearing up your work space.
- Force yourself to handle emails and paperwork the first time that you touch them in order to avoid the piles of paper that can tend to accumulate.
- Plan your day according to what the most important things to achieve that day are.
- Use a timer to keep yourself aware of the time you are spending. If you have to work on other tasks besides the one you are facing, set the timer to limit the amount of time you will allow yourself to spend on it before getting back to the task at hand.
- Create a filing system that would allow anyone else to walk into your space and easily locate what they are looking for.
- Don't leave for the day without making a 'to do' list for the next day



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6.5.4 When the Project Feels Overwhelming

If you simply feel overwhelmed by a project, we've discussed the fact that it usually means that something is missing. Once you've identified what that 'something' is, you have the opportunity to ask for that support or resource that will help you to lessen the sense that you are overwhelmed by all that there is to do. You can also try some of the following techniques whenever you feel overwhelmed:

- Take the task and break it into smaller, easily achievable tasks.
- Start with the easiest or fastest tasks first so that you feel some sense of accomplishment.
- Reward yourself as you complete each sub-task. Such positive reinforcement can help you feel more optimistic about the rest of the project.
- Ask for input from others, particularly if you haven't managed a project of this size before. Getting a brief 'lessons learned' from someone else can equip you to recognize pit falls before you hit them.

6.5.5 When You Are a Perfectionist

Perfectionism is often based on the fear of what will happen if you make a mistake or a fear of 'looking bad.' However, you can take some steps to avoid these negative consequences without getting stopped because you are afraid the results won't be perfect. Some tips include:

- Review the expected results for the project with your supervisor. What would he or she consider success to look like?
- Schedule regular check-in points with your supervisor and/or team mates so you can identify any potential problems before they occur.
- Realize that no one is perfect and hiccups will occur. Instead of letting this cause you to procrastinate, consider it a challenge to your problem-solving skills.
- Practice some stress-management techniques so that you are prepared for those moments when problems arise.

6.5.6 When You Are Having Trouble Making a Decision

In any project there are times when you will have to make a decision. Yet if you aren't sure which option is the best one, you will undoubtedly find yourself at a standstill. However, you need to realize that this is just another form of procrastination. You can take a number of steps to help you make that decision and keep on moving. Some suggestions include:

- Use one of the prioritization tools discussed in Chapter 4 to help you identify the best choice.
- Use group consensus to come to the best decision.
- Ask for input from your supervisor or others.
- When all else fails, just make the best choice that you can. Moving forward in any direction is usually better than not moving at all.

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7 Scheduling

7.1 Introduction

If you are someone who feels that schedules are restrictive, then you haven't yet learned the power that they can provide. We live in a world where there is always something jockeying for our attention and our time. For you to be able to fit in the things that are important to your job and to you, a schedule is a vital tool. It allows you to block out segments of time and assign them to a specific activity. At work, a schedule offers additional benefits because it allows you to:

- Ensure you've allotted time for all of your necessary tasks and functions
- Cut off unproductive interruptions by referring to it
- Limit meetings to their scheduled time rather than letting them go on until people feel like leaving
- Demonstrate that your plate is full if the boss inquires whether you have time to take on additional work
- Allot time for yourself for breaks
- Identify whether or not a goal is SMART

If you are someone who feels that schedules are restrictive, then you haven't yet learned the power they can provide.

Scheduling is actually a form of organization. It can help you prevent any wasted time in exchange for making time for the things that are truly important. For example, how many times have you sat down in front of the computer intending to just read the day's headlines, but the next thing you know you've been distracted for an hour? If you are intentional with your time scheduling, you can instead have a purpose for your time – a purpose that is important to you and to the organization.

The first step in scheduling is to start with a 'master schedule.' This is a listing of the days of the week and the hours available in that week, as well as the requirements that are fixed in your schedule. For example, if you know that payroll is due every Friday by noon, then you will have to block out time for completing the information Friday morning at the latest. Fill in all of the fixed tasks that you can identify. Add blocks of time for tasks that are required every day, such as reading and responding to email and checking voicemail. Be sure to schedule in your breaks as well.

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What's left is time that you can schedule in order to help you be as productive as possible. You should use your prioritized list of activities as a guide to fill in these hours. For example, you might decide that you are going to dedicate two hours on Monday to working on the sales presentation that you have to complete for next week. You then schedule two more hours on Wednesday for a review and editing session. Continue to fill in your days with different tasks assigned to their dedicated time slots. Be sure to leave some space open in order to handle the unexpected.

Once you've scheduled in time for the things that are important for you to complete, you need to treat those appointments with yourself and your work just as if they were a meeting or other required event. It can take practice to train yourself to do this – particularly if you have never worked to a schedule before. But when you schedule time for what is important and you stick to that schedule, you will find that you are more productive overall and less inclined to fall victim to procrastination

7.2 Scheduling Options

Scheduling activities help you with your work, particularly if there are certain items that you never seem to find the time to do or items that you seem to put off doing time and again. But to be as effective a tool as possible, you should think about scheduling in short, medium, and long-term time frames.

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7.2.1 Long Term Schedules

Most of us have goals that have been set for us for a period of time such as a quarter or a year. In order to achieve those goals, we need to manage time effectively. Besides using the skills already discussed in this ebook, a long-term schedule lets you plan for how you will reach these long-term goals.

You can start a long-term schedule with a master schedule that lists those fixed tasks that you identified in the previous section. Then you can fill in what you estimate to be the required time that will be required each week in order to complete a project on time. You don't necessarily have to decide now that on the third Tuesday of next month you will make phone calls to 25 customers. But you should know what you need to achieve that week in order to meet that month's goals, which will lead you to making that quarter's goals and then your goals for the year.

7.2.2 Medium Term Schedules

In many cases, a weekly or monthly schedule will serve as a long enough time for a medium term schedule. It simply depends on what makes the most sense for your type of work. For example, if your work tends to cycle over a month-long period, then use a month as the basic length of time for your medium-term schedule. This becomes a snapshot of your activity for the month or week that you can use to help you reach those longer term scheduling goals. Again, be sure that you leave time for those unexpected tasks so that they don't derail your planning when they occur. Don't forget to schedule time to get your scheduling done for next month either.

7.2.3 Short Term Schedules

In most cases, a short-term schedule refers to a daily schedule. Your daily schedule not only helps you make sure that you are working on the most important things first, but it also serves as a record for what you have accomplished. Remember to be as specific as possible when you fill in your daily schedule so that it is perfectly clear whether or not you have achieved what you set out to do. If you still find that you are having time management issues, review your schedule and compare it to what you actually did during that day. You may be able to discover where the weaknesses remain in your time management skills.

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8 Resources

Lifeorganizers.com. Managing Interruptions.
http://www.lifeorganizers.com/Office-Home-Office/The-Organized-Work-Place/Managing-Interruptions.html.

Make-it-fly.com. Daily Activities Record.
http://www.make-it-fly.com/dar.pdf

Mindtools.com. Various articles on time management.
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_HTE.htm

Slade, Chrissie. Managing Interruptions. http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/Slade5.html

Topachievement.com. Creating S.M.A.R.T. Goals. http://www.topachievement.com/smart.html

Virginia Tech. Time Scheduling Suggestions. http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/htimesug.html.

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